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Jesus Increased in Wisdom and Years ... Have You?

Luke 2:41-52

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This morning I'd like to speak about the pursuit of excellence. I'd like to ask you why you are doing the things you do, and if those activities help make you into the person you would like to be?

A fifteen-year-old boy was arrested in Hollywood, Florida, for repeatedly committing incest with his 8-year-old half sister. When police detectives asked the boy what gave him the idea to do something like that, he quickly responded, "I watched the *Jerry Springer Show*."

The habit of his heart was to watch television, and to work out in his real life something that he saw modeled. There are so many problems with this it is hard to get at them all. The absence of his parents, the presence of television, the irresponsibility of television producers and the advertising establishment that supports such programming, and a society that tolerates it. How do we get to a place where cut throat morality occupies the nation's attention all summer long in *Survivor*?

Aristotle once said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." The writer to the Hebrews said that discipline leads to being right with ourselves and right with God (righteousness - Hebrews 12:11). What are the habits of *our* hearts?

A year ago we were giving some attention toY2K. The small camp stove I bought to prepare my family in the event of a power failure got used a few months ago when we did, in fact, have a early Sunday AM power failure, and by candlelight we found a way to have our morning coffee. Otherwise, where has the time gone? It's a good question you might also ask after the Gospel reading for today - last Sunday we heard about the birth of Jesus, and this week we hear he is on the brink of becoming a teenager! Where did the time go? What happened?

Early authors tried to guess at these 'lost' years in the life of Jesus. One early writer came up with the story of how the child Jesus made birds out of clay, which then came to life and flew away when he clapped his hands. There are other similar stories, none of which have been included in any of the Gospel accounts because neither the Gospel authors nor God who inspired them, saw these legends as being particularly helpful in understanding who Jesus was. So, Luke describes the bulk of Jesus' first thirty years with one verse, 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.'

We increase in years regardless of any effort on our part. But how do we compare to Jesus when we read the rest of this verse? As we increase in years, do we also increase in wisdom? Wisdom isn't the accumulation of facts. The people who are lucky on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* are not demonstrating wisdom. From the perspective of the Bible, wisdom is coming to an understanding of God's ways, and thus to an understanding of ourselves, people made in the image of God.

Over the last year, have you been growing in divine and human favor? Chances are, you have been concentrating on the latter, pleasing other people, or pleasing yourself. So, what are the things you have done to enhance the way God looks at you? Today is an ideal time to look at such things. Today is *the* day to make New Year's resolutions. I saw a bumper sticker that said

"people sow their wild oats on Saturday night, and on Sunday morning pray for crop failure." Is that you?

How far should you go towards pursuing God? I like the words of Joe Namath: "If you aren't going all the way, why go at all?"

What habits of the heart will get you to the place where you become the woman or man God would have you be? What will it take? Are you ready for the challenge? Are you willing to go for the real brass ring? Do you really want to be healed? Are you really willing to grow up?

I was dismayed when I did an internet search for youth ministry sites. Most of these web sites focus primarily on recreation. Likewise, at Christian bookstores there are bunches of books that deal with how to lead games with young people. Although water balloon volleyball and Frisbee golf are fun and, at times, a very appropriate element of youth ministry, those kinds of activities are not what youth ministry is meant to be all about. Water balloon volleyball and Frisbee golf are not the ways Jesus grew in wisdom and divine favor. A recent poll in *Newsweek* found that 78% of teenagers said that religion was important to them but only half of the students said they attended services regularly. So, there is a spiritual yearning among our young people, but are we responding to that spiritual hunger with pizza or with the words of Jesus?

I am convinced that Pastor Jeff is doing the later, but the producers of 'shock television' have more money and more resources than most of our churches. We are often more defined by the secular world than by our religious affinities. Jesus grew in wisdom. I have been teaching for well over a year that Jesus was human in every way, just like you, just like me. Jesus was not able to maintain a better spiritual discipline because he was also God - Jesus laid aside, did not count on, did not rely on, did not draw on, his divinity while on earth. He was just like you and me - which means you and me can be just like him. The question for 2001 is, 'Do you want to be?'

The shoe company *Nike* has made famous two phrases. 'Just do it' and 'Life is short. Play hard.' So many of us have a sense that we should give our faith more attention, but never seem to get around to doing anything about it. Maybe this church needs to say, 'Just do it.' Likewise, we tend to live out our days as though we had an eternity upon this earth. We would be well advised to remind ourselves that life is short. I urge you to consider this exhortation as you consider any New Year's resolutions - Life *is* short. God would have us make the most of our time. That means 'play hard' = engage your faith, get real. If you aren't going all the way, why go at all? You are what you repeatedly do - excellence isn't a one time thing, but a habit of your heart. In 2001, make it so.

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